

## Why enrich your horse's environment?

Personally, I try to make every day wonderful and so I want my horses to have an extraordinary life too.

Here are some reasons why providing a fantastic lifestyle is important:

- To empower them with choices and control over their own life. Their whole life is planned by us; where they go, what they eat, when they eat, when they can visit their friends etc! Any choice you give an animal improves their welfare massively.
- A stimulating environment develops their problem solving skills which makes them easier to train.
- To help them adapt to domestic life e.g. the feral horse can walk over 100 miles a day <sup>10</sup>, whereas many domestic horses are kept stabled for the majority of their time.
- Animals are internally driven to do certain behaviours. Provide them with an outlet for the need and you will stop them fulfilling it in ways you disapprove of e.g. give your horse branches and logs to browse on and they will stop eating your fence posts.
- Would you get bored if you had a strict routine and there was never anything new? Yes...well animals feel the same. Obviously, they will differ in their tastes and needs, just as people do. Some horses may like to go out for hours on adventures whereas another may be pleased as punch to find a hidden carrot.
- Positive, diverse experiences boost the confidence of young <sup>21</sup>.
- Fun, light exercise boosts the immune system and mood <sup>9</sup>. Many horses will enjoy going for outings in the countryside. They love to stop and munch on a tree which they don't have at home and take in the sights.
- An environment with companions of the same species and plenty of comfortable space to lay flat supports good sleep. Sleep is important for their physical health and it aids in the consolidation of long-term memories and so is vital for learning <sup>8</sup>.
- To enhance their physical health e.g. horses who graze for 17 hours will be better off than horses who eat high up from a hay net and so have adversely affected teeth, nerves, muscles and airways <sup>11</sup>.
- To avoid aggression. A good set-up will show animals that resources are not scarce and so they do not have to compete and behave aggressively.
- Animals who have a happy lifestyle and are well balanced emotionally will raise happy, confident offspring <sup>4</sup>.
- Good horse management e.g. the equicentral system, has a knock on affect on the quality of your pasture reducing bare soil, mud, weeds and overgrazing <sup>12</sup>.
- To make them happy.



If a horse lives in an environment which they find stressful due to being lonely, repeatedly frightened, overstimulated or bored unfortunately the effects may be:

(Deep breath and brace yourself for doom and gloom)

- High blood pressure, inhibited growth and infertility are all possible symptoms of long-term stress due to the prolonged secretions of stress hormones <sup>15</sup>.
- The stress response also releases fatty acids into the blood stream, which contributes to deposits inside the artery walls which may lead to coronary heart disease <sup>9</sup>.
- These same hormones can cause brain damage if the stress is severe e.g. chronic back pain <sup>1</sup>.
- A suppressed immune system (vulnerable to infections) causing more illness which lasts longer, has more severe symptoms and takes longer to recover from <sup>9</sup>.
- On the other hand the immune system can attack itself causing auto-immune disorders e.g. sweet itch, diabetes mellitus and rheumatoid arthritis etc <sup>9</sup>.
- Headaches, exhaustion, emotional instability and irritability <sup>9</sup>.
- Digestive upsets and food to be passed out of the body before it is properly digested leading to weight loss <sup>5</sup>.
- Grief, depression or stress can foster the development of cancer. It can make tumours develop sooner, grow faster and make them more likely to be fatal. It is important to note that people who are most likely to develop cancer are those who suppress their emotions and comply with others e.g. the 'bombproof' riding school horse <sup>9</sup>. Just because an animal doesn't physically show behaviours of fear or pain does not mean they are not feeling it.
- Early life attachment breakdowns (premature abrupt weaning), social isolation and traumatic experiences cause under-development in certain parts of the brain, which help with controlling emotions. Unfortunately, this can make animals who have been through this more reactive and easily frustrated and/or aggressive <sup>19</sup>.
- Stress disrupts the collection, storage and retrieval of memories and so interferes with learning <sup>2</sup>.
- Sterotypies e.g. weaving and crib-biting are caused by poor management practices specifically being alone, confined and frustrated <sup>11</sup>.
- Stress is just one of the causes of gastric ulcers, which are extremely common and painful <sup>20</sup>.
- Stressed animals may die earlier due to the above.
- Not surprisingly stressed animals behave in ways which make us stressed.



I know, blimey!

So, to conclude it's pretty important to spend time enriching your horse's environment! If you want to learn how to fulfil your horse's needs and enrich their environment please find the articles at <http://meadowfamilyrescue.wix.com/welcome#!articles/cywh> and like the facebook page at [www.facebook.com/meadowfamilyrescue](http://www.facebook.com/meadowfamilyrescue) to be kept up to date with any new info.

P.S. The effects of stress are the same for us too so make sure to be happy yourself.



## References

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